



IRISH SEA CROSSING

HOLYHEAD-DUN LAOGHAIRE

5-6 AUGUST 2002

ROB CUNLIFFE AND GEORGE ARNISON

Several years ago a bloke said to me, "forget mountaineering, for real adventure, go sea kayaking". And so it was, on a balmy summer evening, and from a perfectly safe beach, we edged our sea kayaks out of Porth Dafarch, near Holyhead, Anglesey. Our destination, Dun Laoghaire near Dublin some 63 nautical miles (NM), and 20 hours of near continuous paddling away.



Rob being interviewed by BBC Midlands Today

one of the questions...why do you want to do it.....'because it's there'!!

We first discussed undertaking a big open sea crossing about a year before at a North West Sea Kayakers weekend on Anglesey, and decided very quickly that the Dublin trip was 'the one'. Soon after, we undertook a weeklong expedition in the Outer Hebrides, which included a committing 16 NM crossing of the Little Minch from the Isle of Skye to Lewis. Despite our preparations, it turned into a nightmare. Struggling into an unforecast force 4-5 wind and rolling in a choppy cross-sea, Rob was violently seasick and at times, thought he would never make it. It was a good lesson for us: expect the unexpected - it can only get better.

Our training continued sporadically throughout the winter, general fitness work supplemented by some light paddling up and down the canal or river. Planning continued at the same time with tides, weather, shipping, food, travel, equipment all having to be considered in detail. As our plans developed our main outstanding concerns were firstly, avoiding being run down by one of the ferries and secondly how would our bodies stand up to 20 hours sitting in a kayak - having never before done more than 5 hours without a break?

It wasn't until May that we could do a sea trip and we started with a 20 NM paddle up and down the

Menai Straits. We had one objective, to stay in our boats for the duration of the trip and to be able to supply ourselves with food and water. We spent 6 hours in the boats, mastered the pee bottle, and felt OK - a new record for us but a long way short of our ultimate target.

Gradually we built up our 'boat-hours' struggling against strong winds off Anglesey, dodging ferries off Liverpool and gaining experience of night paddling in the Dee Estuary. Our most interesting training run was from the centre of Chester, up the River Dee and along the Flintshire coast to the Point of Ayr and back, a distance of 44 NM miles. Assisted by the tides it took just 12 hours - deceptively quick, but we knew the Dublin crossing would be a lot harder and longer.

Using the trip to raise funds for the Fire Services Benevolent Fund and Border Collie Trust (GB), Rob was contacted by BBC Midlands TV who filmed us training on the River Severn for the local news. We really couldn't change our minds now - not that we wanted to!

We had decided firstly, that we should leave just before high water so the ebbing tide would carry us south - away from the busy ferry routes; secondly we wanted to leave just before darkness so that we would be at our most alert during the night. Finally, if the forecast wind exceeded Force 3 - we wouldn't go. The first window of opportunity was at the beginning of August. The tides were relatively weak and the weather outlook was fine, a 2 day gap in a complex system of fronts leaving stable N-NE winds (force 2-3) over the Irish Sea.....good enough.

Outdoor people can talk forever about kit, the pros and cons of each particular item. Amongst other things, the fitting of the navigation lights was proving a problem, eventually, after making a small mast for each boat we taped conical white lights to the top of them. After advice from the Coastguard, the masts were covered in kitchen foil to act as a deflector for radar.

We were to put in at Port Dafarch at 9pm. Adrenalin made getting some sleep during the day impossible. Instead we checked our boats and equipment over and over again, prepared food and made final navigational calculations. After confirming our passage details with HM Coastguard in Holyhead we left the beach, set our course of 280°(Magnetic) and quietly paddled into an impressive sunset - a solitary seal escorting us out to sea.



Final checks.....paddling out of Porth Dafarch watched by Rob's border collie, our only reliable witness !!



We had a long way to go but our spirits were high, lifted by the good weather and the fact that after a year of preparing and talking about the trip we were actually doing it. The glow of the sunset disappeared, swallowed up by the darkness, and before long it was very, very dark. No moon tonight, and we felt that we were paddling closer to each other than usual - visible only by our rudimentary navigation lights and the bright green luminescence splashing from our bows and paddles.

Occasionally we would see the lights of a fishing boat crossing our path in the distance, or a ferry passing way to the north, but we were surprised how little shipping we encountered.

The darkness, particularly to the south was overbearing, it felt as if you could put your hand out and you would fall off the edge of the world. As the hours went by, we spoke less and less, just wanting to enjoy the atmosphere, the feeling of exposure and loneliness. Only sea kayaking an open crossing in the dark can give you this feeling.



4am George watching sunrise.....bloody fantastic

We stopped for a strict 5 minutes every hour to grab a quick snack, swap water bottles over, have a pee and log our position on the GPS. Every couple of hours we reported in to the Coastguard on the handheld VHF.

The darkness was eventually broken by sunrise and the dawn was magical with a fiery sky appearing over a totally flat, calm sea. All around us porpoises lazily arched out of the mirror like surface. We couldn't help stopping for a while to enjoy it and take photographs.



Morale was still great, helped along by the warming sun on our backs, although at the back of our minds we knew we still had well over half way to go.



We had also 'lost' an hour through longer than intended breaks, and were slightly further south than planned so we adjusted our course by +10°. This would take us further north than planned but meant that we wouldn't have to paddle against the ebb tide on the final third of the trip, although we were aware that it would also take us across the main ferry route.



in the middle of the pond !!



We paddled steadily on for a few more hours, and with the flood tide assisting us, made good progress. By 9am we had paddled about 38NM, were calling up the coastguard in Dublin rather than Holyhead, and were feeling good. Ahead of us however we could clearly see a dense fog bank rolling towards us. As the fog closed in we were in for an anxious time. Visibility could only be 100 metres and we were in the middle of the main shipping lane. A trawler passed close-by - only its foghorn could be heard. Then a much more menacing noise, the diesel engines of a large ship. The distinctive noise was suddenly very close and we both stopped paddling, and held our breath trying to pinpoint its location. Our eyes strained through the fog in every direction expecting to see the bows of a tanker



come steaming towards us at any moment.

Eventually the thump of the engines began to go away from us and in less than a minute we were glad to be riding the wash of the ship, knowing it had missed us. This had been a scary moment, and from this point on we were very careful. Even with the fog slowly lifting, with nothing to look at it was impossible to gauge visibility. A short time later we were discussing the effectiveness of our foil-covered masts, when there was a sudden - very loud - blast of a foghorn directly behind us. Looking around we saw the High Speed cataraman appearing out of the mist just 200m away and heading straight for us. All our energy was required to sprint to our right, and in no time it had cruised passed at 42 knots. Again, we rode the wash, this time whooping with exhilaration and relief.

any one for lager !!



not funny !!



With about 18 miles to go we emerged from the fog bank and started to scan the horizon for land. There were several times when we thought we had seen the headlands off Dublin Bay, each time being fooled by the flat light, but eventually there was no mistaking the lighthouse of Kish Bank and the headland behind - brilliant!

Over the next couple of hours however we just didn't feel like we were making any progress at all. We buckled down to some hard paddling - maintaining a sharp lookout for the ferries around us - but despite our aching muscles the land just didn't seem to get any closer and we both suffered from a noticeable drop in spirits. To boost our morale we took a tactical decision to alter course again by - 20° so that we gained some advantage from the ebb tide flowing across us. We would be carried south of Dun Laoghairie and would probably have to paddle into the tide for the last hour or so - but maybe the current would be weaker close to shore or we would find an eddy flowing in our direction - and right now we needed to feel like we were making progress. The tactic worked but the final leg was still a real 'grind'. We now paddled a little way apart, heads down and grim, silently focusing on keeping our technique, maximising distance for minimum energy expended - stroke after stroke after stroke. The atmosphere of paddling through the night, the exhilaration of dawn and the euphoria of not being run down in the fog all seemed like a different trip. We just wanted to get in and stopped for just 15 minutes in the last 5 hours.

Gradually we approached Kish Bank, crossed it and then left it behind us. The last obstruction was a line of super tankers going into Dublin Bay, before we finally entered the bay's sheltered water and followed the coast up to the ferry port of Dun Laoghaire. We were nearly smiling when we realised that we had to paddle around the breakwater of the harbour wall!



end of the road.....



At last the slipway of the Royal Irish Yacht Club (RIYC) - we had done it! Without the help of some members of the club we would still be sitting there and we were very grateful for the help given to us. Our legs were completely numb and Georges' right knee had swollen to twice its normal size so that he could hardly walk. A small crowd of young dinghy sailors - suitably impressed by our achievement (*where've* you come from!!) - carried our boats up the slipway, and later helped us push them on borrowed wheelbarrows to the ferry terminal. We had a hot shower and made our way to the bar for a ceremonial pint of Guinness....fantastic. Our achievement had still not really sunk in as we later boarded the fast cataraman (the one that we had met in the fog), taking our boats as 'hand-luggage'. We were instantly asleep and awoke back in Holyhead only 90 minutes later!!



Thanks must go to the people who have done this trip before and the inspiration their reports gave to us, to the help we got from the Coastguard and the RIYC, and also to our families, who have had to put up with us in achieving our goal. Afterward, we both felt "very glad to have done it, but don't think we'll do it again". Looking back now, it doesn't seem quite so bad...

At the time of writing, Peter Hatt, founder and motivating force behind North West Sea Kayakers sadly passed away (Sept 2002).

One of life's good guys.....Rest in Peace Hattie.

Technical Notes:

George Arnison (38, a civil engineer, from Chester) and Rob Cunliffe (37, a firefighter from Staffordshire) both married with small children, and have been sea kayaking for a number of years. Rob paddled a P&H Sirius sea-kayak and George paddled a Nordkapp HM sea-kayak. Both carried handheld VHF radios, flares, navigation lights, charts, fixed compasses, spare paddles and the usual sea-kayaking clothing, provisions and water. George also carried a hand-held GPS.

By Rob Cunliffe and George Arnison, 31.09.02

